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ABSTRACT

While research on humor in children has increased in the past 20 years, there is less information on adult humor. The Humor Assessment Instrument (HUMA) was developed as part of an ongoing humor intervention project. HUMA was used to interview 398 adults on their perception of humor in the media, humor among acquaintances, humor in parents, most and least liked humor, and blocks to humor. Results from younger adults, aged 20-29 (N=118) and older adults, aged 50 and over (N=107) were used to examine age and sex differences in adult humor. The results revealed that, as recipients, younger people enjoyed humor in the media and with acquaintances for the other person's "outlook on life" while the reason given for personal use of humor was "tension release." Women more than men reported parents as having no sense of humor, with older women citing no humor more often than younger women. The data also revealed that for women, the favorite kind of humor reflected "outlook on life" while the least favorite kind of humor was put-down humor. Blocks to humor reflected more age differences than sex differences. (HUMA is included.) (Author/NB)

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HUMOR ASSESSMENT: FROM MAY TO DECEMBER

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ABSTRACT

While research on humor in children has increased in the past two decades, there is less information on adult humor. As part of an ongoing humor intervention project, the Humor Assessment Instrument (HUMAI) was developed to interview 298 adults on their perception of humor in the media, among acquaintances, in parents, most and least liked humor and blocks to humor. Here is reported a study of age and sex differences among 118 younger (20-29) and 107 older adults (over 50). Results indicate that as recipients younger people enjoy humor in media and with acquaintances for the other person's "outlook on life" while the reason given for personal use of humor is "tension release". Women more than men reported parents has having no sense of humor with older women citing no humor more than younger women. The data also revealed that for women the favorite kind of humor reflects outlook on life while least favorite kind of humor is put down humor. Blocks to humor reflected more age differences than sex differences.

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Introduction

Anthropologists point out humans are verbal, witty, and humorous; animals are not. Humor is an essential human quality inadequately studied by psychologists. Nahemow (1986) commented: "Humor is a key element in the human repertoire -- so much so that many consider it as a defining human attribute" (p. 3). However, this key element in the human repertoire has only recently been studied by psychologists. According to McGhee (1986), few studies were done between 1930 and 1960. Serious empirical studies of children's humor began in 1970 with populations ranging from infancy to adolescence (McGhee, 1979; Pinderhughes & Zigler, 1985; Sanford & Elder, 1984; Ziv, 1981). However, there is little information beyond adolescence. While Roth & Upmeyer (1985) used 15 to 41 year olds to measure both attitudinal and non-verbal responses to cartoons, they did not report data for age differences. The present report is concerned with humor in adult populations, specifically comparing self reports of younger and older adults.

In the research on developmental psychology, the role of parents is a key element in the development of the child. Thus the question of the role of parents in humor development is not an unnatural one. Research on the parental influences is limited. Prasinos and Tittler (1981), using a peer nomination technique to identify humor-oriented boy scouts, found lower cohesion, greater conflict, and greater distance from same gender father. Using self reports from

undergraduates, McGhee, Bell and Duffey (1986) found that the only aspect of early parental behavior that accounted for significant amounts of variance in humor scores was the amount of humor shown by the same gender parent while the subject was growing up. Some analyses of comedians and clowns report at least one parent who used joking and humor in childhood (Fisher & Fisher, 1981, 1983; Janus, 1975). Because humor appears to be affected by the presence or absence of humor in the home, the present research studied the presence or absence of humor in mothers and fathers.

Another area of interest in adult humor is sex differences. Do men and women differ in their perceptions of what is funny, the sex of the person with whom they laugh; what are the blocks to humor as well as favorite and least favorite kinds of humor? In a summary of research to the late seventies, McGhee (1979) discussed types of cartoons, jokes, or styles preferred by men and women. He regards sex role expectations of society and status differences to explain the finding that males are often the joke tellers while women traditionally react to humor. However, the effect of the changing role of women on humor is also noted by McGhee as well as by Sheppherd (1985). Using a self report measure in a study of undergraduate students, McGhee, Bell and Duffey (1986) concluded that assertiveness positively relates to males' humor while early enjoyment of humor is positively predictive of females' humor.

But how is humor measured? The literature indicates

that most studies of humor measure responses to jokes (Cattell & Luborsky, 1947; Eysenck, 1943; Haslett & Houlihan, 1979) or cartoons (Ferguson, Schwartz & Raypost, 1969; McGhee & Loyd, 1981; Redlich & Levine, 1951; Treadwell, 1970). Responses to records of comedians were used by Derks, Lewis and White in 1981. Feingold (1982, 1983) developed a humor perception test and a humor achievement test. In the latter, familiar lines of comedians are given for recognition. Sanford and Elder (1984) observed adolescents' humor. Sociometric measures were done by Ziv (1979), Frasnica and Tittler (1981), and Babad (1974). Measuring a variety of humor-related variables, Babad concluded there was no relationship between sociometric measures of who is or is not funny and humor tests. In fact, Babad reports, they can contradict and invalidate one another. Self report, however, "...fell between these poles, more closely related to sociometric than to the humor tests" (1974, p. 626). Thus Babad's research supports self-report measures of humor over humor tests.

Since the review of the literature did not reveal a humor interview instrument to study the experience of humor, the Humor Assessment (HUMA) was developed using an interview method to allow subjects to freely report their experience (Heater, 1986). Analyzing age and sex differences using HUMA was the focus of this present research.

Method

Humor Assessment Instrument. The HUMA, presented in

Table 1, grew out of the experience of the authors and the work of Joel Goodman (1983). The questions ask subjects to identify favorite comedian/enne in media, acquaintances who were funny, and recollections about parents' humor. They are then asked about their own humor: how others would describe their humor, how they have used it in their lives, favorite and least favorite kinds of humor, blocks to humor, and areas of their lives to which they would like to add humor. A pilot form of the instrument was tested on a sample of twenty and, with few changes, was used with larger populations (Hester, 1986; Hillman, 1987).

Subjects. HUMA was administered to a convenience sample of 398 subjects ranging in age from 20 to 98 in an American group. The younger sample was composed of 118 persons ages 20-29. Forty-four percent of the group were males and 56% females. Of the 107 subjects in the older group (ages 50 and over), 48% are men and 52% are women.

Interview Method. An interview method was used to gather information about the person's humor and to establish a relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. While the research is based on self report of subjects and their recollections of parents' humor, a consistency of responses across a wide range of adult subjects was obtained.

Coding. For questions one to seven, one coding category was used, while for questions eight to 12 separate coding categories were developed (Table 2). To insure reliability of coding, two out of three rater agreement for each response

was used. Because of the qualitative nature of the data, numbers and percents of responses were calculated.

Results

When do you think is funny and why? The first two questions ask the subjects to name who in the media and among their acquaintances they think are funny and why. The third question asks with whom they laugh and why. In analyzing sex differences of the person chosen, a trend for both age groups from predominantly male choices to more female choices can be seen on Figure 1, 2, and 3. To allow space to compare the three sets of results, the frequency of percent on ordinate line goes to 70% rather than 100%. "No responses" category meant that subjects either did not answer or that they answered with a unisex name that made categorization impossible.

Sex Differences. While sex differences are not apparently different in the media question, female subjects (21% younger and 24% older women) and older men (21%) laugh more with women than with men. In giving reasons for their choices, younger subjects consistently chose "outlook on life" (42%) while older subjects named delivery (35%) for media person and content (33%) for acquaintance. Both age groups chose "outlook on life" as reason for selecting the person with whom they laugh.

Perceptions of parental humor. When asked if their parents were funny and why, category seven, the largest response indicated parents had no humor (See Figure 2 for age

differences). Thirty-one percent of younger subjects and 50% of older subject stated that their mothers had no humor, with women responding with more frequency. Similarly with father's humor, 31% of younger subjects stated that their fathers had no humor. Consistently, older women were highest in stating no humor for parents. The reason most often given for what made parents funny was content.

Use of humor among subjects. When asked how they used humor in their lives, 61% of younger subjects reported tension release as first choice in contrast to 36% of older adults. When asked how they used humor in the past month, younger subjects again stated tension release (41%) while older subjects reported content/stories (36%) as first choice. Older adults reported tension release 21%. While the younger adults cited tension release in larger percentages as their reason for humor, women consistently cited it more than men in both age categories.

Most and least favorite kind of humor. As Table 2 indicates, the coding of most and least favorite kind of humor is different than the first eight questions. Younger adults cited outlook on life and verbal content (31 and 30%) as their favorite humor. Older adults chose verbal (34%) over outlook on life (22%). More women chose outlook on life although this category tied with verbal content for older women.

With least favorite humor, 51% of younger adults selected prejudice or put-down humor with older adults

reporting 34% for the same first choice category. Thirty percent of younger women voted prejudice/put-down humor as least-liked as opposed to 21% of younger men. Older adults reported it 24% while younger adults gave it 17%. Older men, however, reported prejudice ranked with dirty/vulgar (15% each) at top of least-liked list.

Blocks to humor. Among younger subjects, 52% reported settings that feeling strange in the presence of others as biggest block to humor. Thirty percent of older adults cited self negative (pain, depression, fear, fatigue, anger, stress) as the biggest block to humor while feeling strange in the presence of others was reported by 29%. Older women reported more self negative responses than men, but the age differences were the most worthy of note here.

In response to "what area of your life would you add humor?", 34% younger subjects responded to work/school while 27% of older subjects' first choice was relationships. Younger women responded 23% to work/school while next highest was older women's 15% response to relationships. Male scores were more spread among response alternatives.

Discussion

The current research on age and sex differences in responses to the HUMA is part of an ongoing project to encourage people to think of humor as a positive intervention in their lives. Contrary to most other research methods measuring humor, the focus of the present research is one's EXPERIENCE of humor rather than one's reaction to jokes or

cartoons. Thus, by asking questions about their past and current use of humor, humor in their environment: among their acquaintances, in their family, and in their own lives, subjects were giving information about their experience of humor, both the kind of humor that "works" for them and when it is difficult.

Consistent responses to the overall questionnaire were: "It makes me think." "These are difficult questions." "I have never thought of them before." "I will have to think more about that." In fact, some of the interview data suggests that a paper and pencil measure might leave more empty spaces because of items required thought and subjects would find it easy to take the avoidance route of "I'll get back to that one later." In the presence of the interviewer with pencil poised, the subject stayed with the questions.

A second bit of unobtrusive data are the preconceptions people have about humor. Some subjects would say: "I am not funny; I don't tell jokes." or "I am not funny, I never remember punch lines." After the sample with 177 adults (Hester, 1986), to the HUMA question "How would you describe yourself?", Babad's response categories were added: (1) No humor, (2) appreciator, (3) initiator, (4) appreciator and initiator.

What have we learned about age differences in humor as measured by the HUMA instrument? Younger subjects responded to "outlook on life" as the reason that a person, whether comedian or acquaintance, was regarded as funny to them.

Younger persons stated "tension release" as the primary use of humor in their own lives. Older subjects reported parents as having no humor with older women citing it more often for both parents.

Sex differences for the sample indicated that men choose men consistently as funny acquaintances. Younger women choose men and women equally as funny acquaintances, while older women choose men. But women of both age categories laugh more with women. The fact that there are no sex differences in the comedian/enne category might be explained by the limited number of female comediennes in the media, although this number is changing.

Women, more than men, in both age groups reported mothers and fathers having no humor, but age differences are more predominant than sex differences. Women more than men reported tension release as the first reason for using humor in their lives, but again, the younger subjects in both sexes reported it by larger percentage. Both women's groups reported humor related to outlook on life as their favorite kind while older and younger men differed in their top choice.

Thus both younger and older women are similar in reporting outlook on life as their prime reason for finding both comedian/enne and someone they laugh with funny, tension release as primary way of using humor in their lives, and outlook on life as favorite kind of humor.

The humor intervention project has provided us with an

information pool that is rich indeed. As the scientific method indicates, each piece of research leads to some changes and provides new questions. Two areas of change being considered from the results of the present research involves alternative options for the questions of parental humor, parallel coding for most and least liked humor, and considering a pencil and paper alternative to the interview method. In asking about parental humor adding a four response options of 1) no humor, 2) appreciator, 3) initiator, 4) appreciator/initiator would give an objective response for parental humor. Also providing parallel coding for most and least liked humor would enable better comparison of these two questions. We have been asked to consider HUMA as a paper and pencil test for wider application and are considering doing it, though it would not fit the original intention of using the interview as an information-seeking tool for designing humor interventions in health care settings (Ruxton, 1986). However, an abbreviated form of the HUMA will be designed for use in health care settings.

The last question of HUMA is: Where would you like to add humor in the coming week? While we did not code this information, the question reflects the educational aspect of HUMA. The question plants the seed for more immediate implementation. The long range goal of the HUMA authors (Hester & Ruxton, 1986) is to encourage humor intervention as a strategy for coping with stress or a strategy for more healthy living. So let me end with a joke from the Wall

Street Journal sent to me by two HUMA subjects within 24 hours -- "There are essentially four basic forms for a joke -- the concealing of knowledge later revealed, the substitution of one concept for another, an unexpected conclusion to a logical progression, and slipping on a banana peel."

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Table 1

HUMOR ASSESSMENT (HUMA)

CODING

- 1 2 1. Who is your favorite comedian/ienne? What makes him/her funny to you?

- 1 2 2. Among those you know now (your acquaintances), who do you think is
_____ funny? In what way is this person funny?
- 1 2 3. With whom do you laugh most? What is there about that person that
_____ invites you to laugh?
- 2 4. Were your parents humorous? (Give a specific example)
_____ Mom?
- 1 Dad?

- 5a. How would an observer describe you when you are humorous?
Give a specific example.

- 5b. How would you describe yourself:
no humor___1 appreciator___2 initiator___3 appreciator/initiator___4

6. Give an example of how you have used humor throughout your life.

7. Give an example of how you used humor in the past month.

8. What blocks get in the way of using your own humor? When is it hard for you

9. Give an example of your favorite kind of humor.

10. Give an example of your least favorite kind of humor.

11. What is one area of your life that you'd like to add humor to?

12. In the coming week, what would be some specific ways you could add
humor to the area of your life in the above question?

DEMOGRAPHICS

Level of Education: Less than HS___ HS___ Coll.___ Grad.____
Age: _____ Sex: Male___ Female___
Marital Status: Single___ Married___ Divorced___ Widowed___
Ethnic Background: American Indian or Eskimo___ Asian American___
Black Non-Hispanic American___ Hispanic American___
White Non-Hispanic American___ International___

Table 2

Coding Response Categories to HUMA Questions 1 - 7 with

Samples of Frequent Responses

0. No Answer

1. Outlook on Life

- personality
- ordinariness
- ability to laugh at self
- ability to identify with humorist
- a lot in common
- imaginative
- natural

2. Delivery or Style (how they convey)

- facial expressions, mannerisms
- subtle, dry
- sensitivity
- timing, quick response, surprise
- sarcasm
- silly
- laugh
- slapstick
- approach to people
- wit
- stupid

3. Content or Type of Humor (what they say)

- funny stories
- verbal humor, puns, one-liners
- situational
- ethnic
- foibles, personal weakness
- satire
- impersonation
- tease

4. Tension Release

- coping
- response to boredom

5. Other

- appreciator
- off the wall
- prank

6. Do Not Know

7. None (as an answer)

Coding Response Categories to HUMA Questions 8 - 11 with

Samples of Frequent Responses

8. Blocks to Humor

- A-1. Serious: sadness, tragedy, humor is inappropriate
- B-2. Strangeness-others: influence of strangers, different sense of humor, norms against humor; hostility.
- C-3. Self negative: pain, depression, fear, fatigue, anger, stress, own seriousness, busy
- D-4. Never
- E-5. I don't know.
- F-6. Other.

9. Favorite Humor

- A-1. Situational, everyday life, natural, personality, making fun of self, outlook.
- B-2. Slapstick, style, mannerisms, acting out (physical), stand-up, comedy shows, practical jokes, dry, ALL, delivery.
- C-3. Verbal, play on words, songs, jokes, satire, subtle, intellectual, wit, content.
- D-4. Sarcasm.
- E-5. Other: incongruity, unexpected, silly, ethnic, ridicule, tease.
- F-6. None: cannot think of anything.

10. Least Favorite Humor

- A-1. Put down and prejudiced humor; sick; ethnic; Don Rickles; Joan Rivers.
- B-2. Dirty, vulgar, sexual, obscene.
- C-3. Sarcasm.
- D-4. Slapstick.
- E-5. Puns; knock-knock jokes.
- F-6. Other - exaggeration; practical jokes.
- G-7. None.

11. Add Humor To:

- A-1. All areas - work and home.
- B-2. No areas.
- C-3. Work, professional life, school, business life.
- D-4. Relationships with family, friends, god, social.
- E-5. Self:
 - fear
 - stress
 - phobias
 - own death, aging
 - personal life
- F-6. Other:
 - financial
 - writing

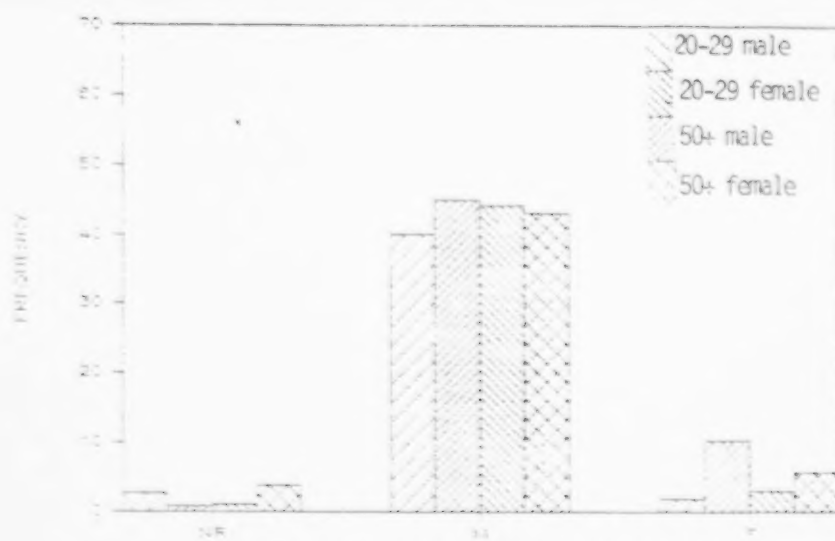


FIGURE 1. SEX OF FAVORITE COMEDIAN

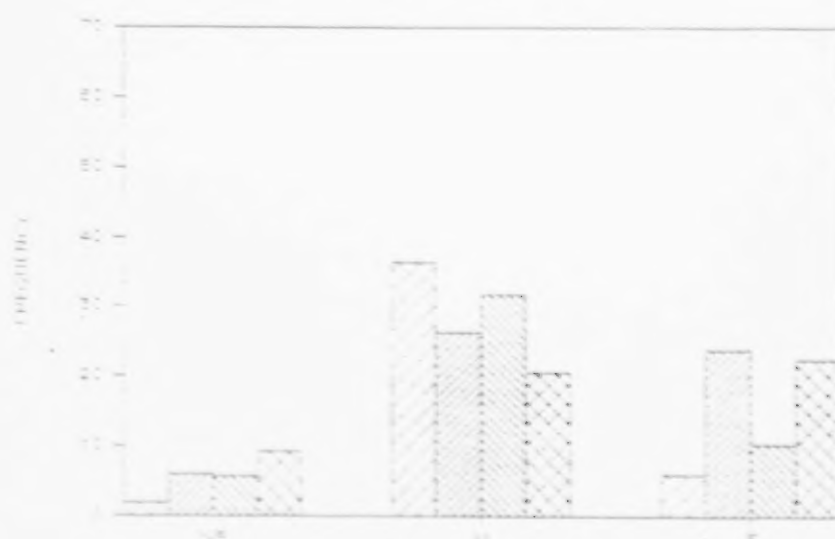


FIGURE 2. SEX OF FUNNY ACQUAINTANCE

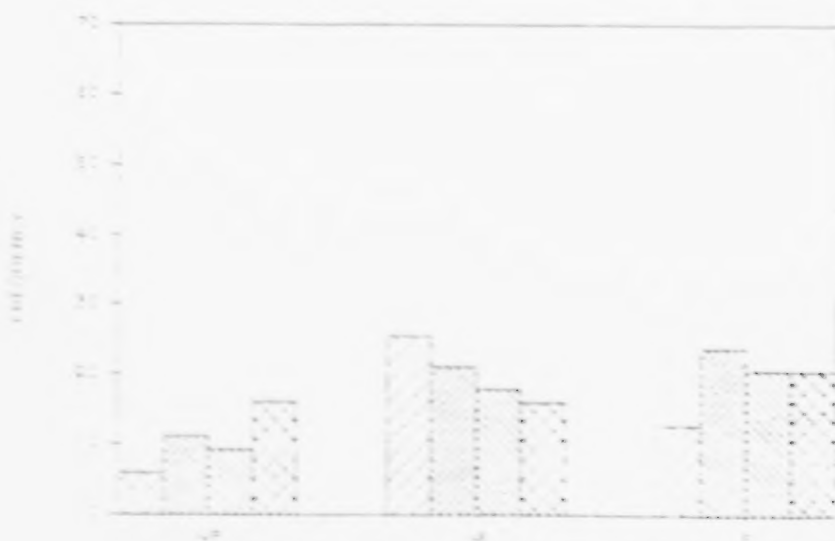


FIGURE 3. SEX YOU LAUGH MOST WITH

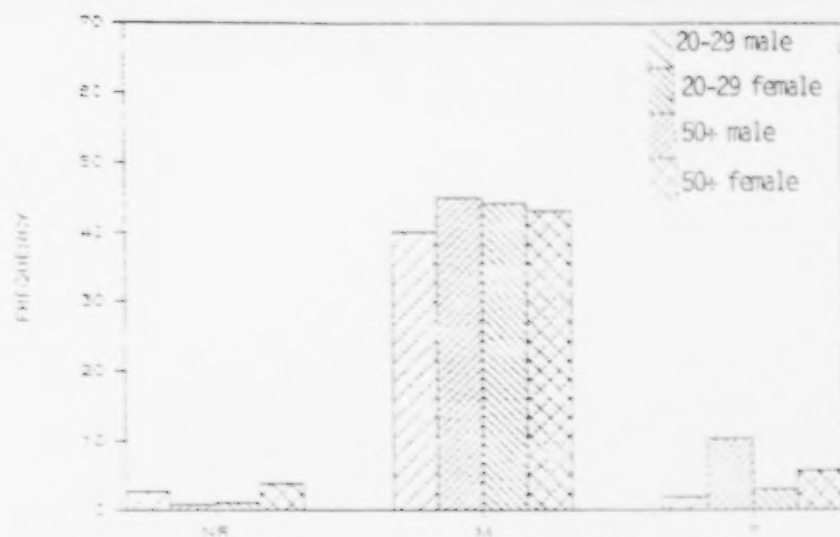


FIGURE 1. SEX OF FAVORITE COMEDIAN

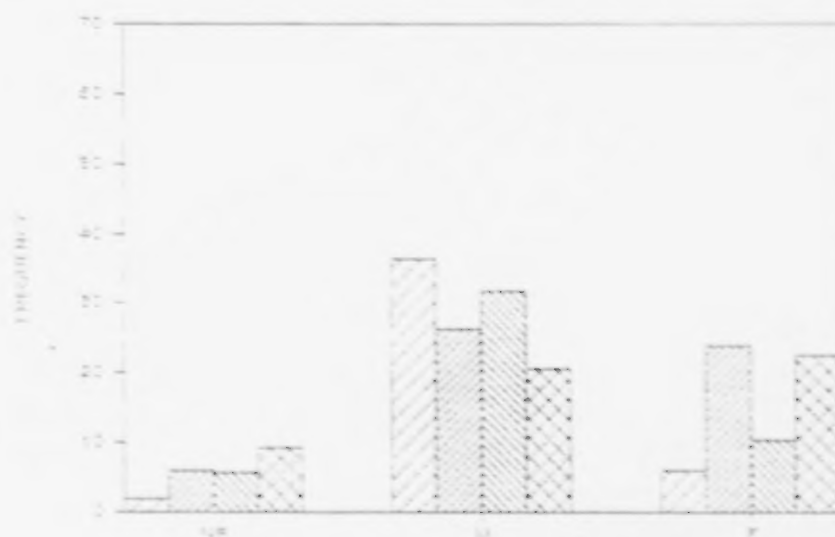


FIGURE 2. SEX OF FUNNY ACQUAINTANCE

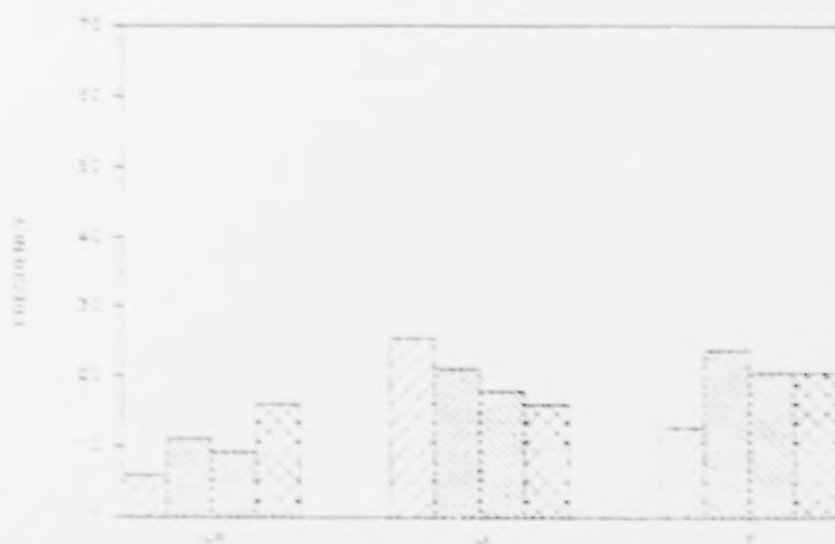


FIGURE 3. SEX YOU LAUGH MOST WITH